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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6412

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RHMFIS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 0490

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 003601

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/09/2026

TAGS: PREL PTER PGOV LE

SUBJECT: SINIORA, HAMADEH PERCEIVE SIGNS THAT HIZBALLAH MAY  
BLINK FIRST

REF: BEIRUT 3599

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

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¶11. (S) Filling in more details of the 11/9 third round of consultations, Prime Minister Siniora and Minister Marwan Hamadeh mused that the March 14 decision to stand tough and even suggest counter demonstration had a positive impact. Both saw initial signs in today's session suggesting Hizballah may be backing down on its threat -- or at least its deadline -- for street demonstrations. Hamadeh reported that a new March 14 flirtation with Michel Aoun, promising him a share of the cabinet, had encouraged the General to have second thoughts about about playing in Hizballah's game.

While as reported in reftel this round of consultations was inconclusive, Hamadeh reported feverish activity behind the scenes, with Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt trying to convince Nabih Berri and Hizballah to accept the special tribunal now in return for cabinet expansion and a broadly acceptable new president later. To pressure Berri and Hizballah, the March 14 leaders have thus reversed themselves on the special tribunal, requesting that UN/OLA send the documents to the GOL no later than Friday, even absent Russian concurrence. In the most encouraging sign that the momentum for street demonstrations may be evaporating, Berri told the consultation participants that, if Saturday's session results in no progress, there is always the possibility of meeting again next Wednesday (11/15), after Berri's return from Iran. End summary.

JUMBLATT AND RA'AD SLING MUD

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¶12. (S) While (as reported reftel) the third round of Lebanese political consultations chaired by Parliament Speaker Berri ended in what our contacts tell us was better atmosphere, Siniora and Hamadeh told us that the session started off on a bad note, with Walid Jumblatt and Hizballah MP Mohammed Ra'ad exchanging insults and accusations of who has more readily sold his soul to foreign powers. In one memorable exchange, Jumblatt blamed Hizballah for President Emile Lahoud's continued tenure in office, to which Raad answered that Hizballah's position are separate from Lahoud's. Jumblatt warned Ra'ad that, when Lahoud blocks initiatives, it is as if Hizballah had done so; "you and Lahoud are one and the same."

¶13. (S) To ease the quickly escalating tension, Saad Hariri approached Jumblatt and theatrically whispered into his ear,

loud enough to be overheard. "Walid bey! You should go visit Lahoud! Go visit Lahoud! You can solve this!" As Jumblatt leaned away, startled, Hariri continued: "I say, visit Lahoud! Look what happened to Rumsfeld after you visited him!" Jumblatt also used the U.S. congressional elections to score points, praising the U.S. congressional candidates for waiting and working until the constitutional time for elections rather than choosing dates based on when opinion polls were most favorable to each of their races. Jumblatt also praised President George Bush for vowing to work with a Congress controlled by the opposing party rather than sending out thugs to assassinate the Democratic winners who defeated his party colleagues.

BERRI STRETCHES DEADLINE  
FOR CONSULTATIONS

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**¶4.** (S) But in general, as we reported reftel, the consultations were characterized by the same debate as before. Participants ridiculed Michel Murr for his characteristically long-winded explanation of why nine out of 26 ministers (in a slightly expanded cabinet) should not really count as a blocking minority (even though 9 is most definitely "more than a third" of 26). Siniora reported that the March 8 representatives were explicit that President Emile Lahoud would refuse to sign any cabinet appointments if, at a minimum, Minister of Justice Charles Rizk and Minister of Culture Tariq Mitri remained in the cabinet in any position. With Jumblatt jumping up at one time to defend Rizk "over my dead body" (a line Hamadeh mused was particularly ill-advised in this atmosphere), March 14 representatives were equally adamant that Rizk and Mitri remain, come what may. Aoun was relatively quiet throughout.

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Eventually, Berri announced that the consultations would resume on Saturday, 11/11, and that he would postpone his trip to Iran. In what Hamadeh took as a hopeful sign, Berri, when asked what would happen if the Saturday consultations were equally inconclusive, answered that it was always possible to get together again on Wednesday (11/15), after he returns from Iran.

"BUREAUCRATIC SABER RATTLING"  
(AND HIZBALLAH SOFTENING?)

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**¶5.** (S) Hamadeh interpreted one Jumblatt-Ra'ad exchange as indicating that Hizballah was starting to back down from its ultimatum of "surrender to our demands or face defeats from our street." Jumblatt told Ra'ad that he was sick of being threatened by Hizballah's arms; "we can't keep negotiating when you have a gun to our heads." Ra'ad professed innocence, repeating the usual blather about Hizballah never directing its weapons internally. When Jumblatt retorted about the knowledge of arms backing up Hizballah's street demonstrations threatened for Monday, Ra'ad denied that Hizballah ever said that it would start demonstrations on Monday. Hamadeh and Siniora both thought that this hinted at a softening in Hizballah's position. Hamadeh in particular argued that, if indeed Hizballah is stepping back from the brink of street demonstrations that could lead "who knows where," it is because March 14 leaders did not back down themselves from their own response to launch counter demonstrations. Jumblatt's PSP and Samir Ja'ja's Lebanese Forces had both already applied for demonstration permits for every day next week, Hamadeh noted, as a "bureaucratic kind of saber rattling." For the first time ever with us, Hamadeh hinted obliquely that some of Jumblatt's Druse followers in the Biqa', on potential front lines with the Shia, had started to acquire weapons. Hizballah's knowledge of this fact may be useful, Hamadeh thought.

MORE HAPPENING BEHIND THE SCENES

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**¶6.** (S) With little but amusing anecdotes to report from the actual session, Hamadeh reported that Hariri and Jumblatt are working behind the scenes to convince Berri to accept a different kind of deal than the blocking minority demanded by Hizballah and Aoun. They want Berri to guarantee unanimous support in the cabinet and passage in the parliament of the special tribunal first, in exchange for March 14's promise to have talks immediately thereafter with the goal of expanding the government and replacing Lahoud with a president broadly acceptable. The question of the blocking minority is left vague, although both Hamadeh and Siniora insisted that the vagueness does not imply softness: March 14 will not give up its ability to govern (itself a vague statement, of course).

**¶7.** (S) Claiming to have no objections himself, Berri asked which presidential candidates were considered broadly acceptable: "(Central Bank Governor) Riad Salameh? (Maronite League President) Michel Edde?" Charles Rizk might have been in that category, Hamadeh quoted Berri as saying, "but now he has a little problem." In language that Siniora thought was encouraging, Berri kept referring to potential objections from his "allies," distinguishing himself more sharply than usual from Hizballah. On the tribunal, for example, Berri told Hamadeh that he wanted to see it move forward now. But his "allies" were afraid that the tribunal "will eventually get to them." When Hariri presented the proposal again to Berri in the presence of Ra'ad (during a break in the consultations), Ra'ad was, predictably, negative, while Berri continued to express more openness to the idea. Responding to the Ambassador, Hamadeh said only that "time will tell" whether Berri's openness was real or a good-cop routine.

#### FLIRTATION WITH AOUN

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**¶8.** (S) Hamadeh said that, in one positive aspect of the consultations, a slight opening had developed between March 14 and Michel Aoun. In the consultations, Aoun had begun to separate himself from Hizballah, which Hamadeh thought reflected the General's concern that he not be too closely involved in what at one point looked to be an initiative headed toward violence. The March 14 leaders, starting with Ja'ja', have tried to encourage this separation, telling Aoun that he should not be involved in any Hizballah and Syrian

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conspiracies, that his ministers will be welcome in any case. "You will have your share." Hamadeh acknowledged that the warming of relations with Aoun may be short-lived, for Aoun still insists on more cabinet ministers than March 14 is willing to give, early parliamentary elections, and a commitment to elect him president. But, for now, the flirtation signals to Hizballah leaders that the Aounists are not blindly going to follow them into the streets. And, Hamadeh acknowledged, the development of trust between Aoun and March 14 would, in fact, be useful for both sides. For now, Hamadeh urged, March 14 is going to assume for argument's sake that Aoun is an innocent victim, used by Hizballah, rather than an active co-conspirator. Aoun, Hamadeh said, "is not really a Syrian. He's just stupid. And blind."

#### CHANGE IN TACTICS FOR THE TRIBUNAL

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**¶9.** (S) Siniora told the Ambassador that, given all of the back channel talks, the position of March 14 leaders on the chronology for discussing the special tribunal has now shifted. While they would still love to have Russian concurrence in hand, they no longer wish to delay UN/OLA's submission of the tribunal documents to the GOL. They want to have the documents in hand by Friday, in order to make the 48-hour deadline for placement on the cabinet agenda for Monday. Even with Russian reservations, the tribunal drafts

will put additional pressure on Hizballah and Berri to make a more comprehensive deal. Hamadeh explained that the March 14 leaders will quickly accuse those who oppose the tribunal of trying to harbor assassins; if, instead, Hizballah joins in cabinet passage of the tribunal documents, then the tribunal can be established soon. Either way, March 14 is on top.

Pressed by the Ambassador, Hamadeh acknowledged that, in fact, a third answer is possible and indeed probable: "yes, but," as Hizballah insists on "studying" the drafts as a delaying tactic. But rather than continue to delay through negotiations with the Russians, UN/OLA should now forward the text to the Lebanese, both Siniora and Hamadeh argued.

¶10. (S) Hamadeh and Siniora expect active behind-the-scenes negotiations between today and Saturday, as March 14 leaders try to lure at least Berri on board for their broadened "tribunal-first" agenda and continue their fliration with Aoun. While the atmosphere is still extremely tense and the situation most delicate, for the first time all week Hamadeh thought that March 14 "might" have found a way forward. For his part, Siniora is still publicly insisting on traveling to Korea and Japan next week, while readily admitting that, depending on what happens Saturday, he may need to stick closer to home.

FELTMAN